

Anyone for an organ transplant?

PHANTOM OF THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

by Karen Feld

She was little more than a name to me then, but how well I remember her now: Gladys Gooding, organist.

She could be found in Ebbetts Field in summer, in Madison Square Garden in winter, leading the Dodger and Ranger faithful in stirring, pregame renditions of our national anthem. I could never quite figure out where the music was coming from, but I'll never forget the lugubrious instrument on which she played. I hated it.

Gladys, mind you. I was rather fond of, even though I'd never set eyes on her. I rather imagined she was a kindly, if slightly eccentric lady with blue hair, just like my grandmother. But her moody organ, that was quite another matter. That meant only one thing to a kid growing up in the forties: the creeps.

Organs were vaporizers, measles, and being laid up with the radio soaps and *Queen for a Day*: it was eechy funeral parlors and Irish biddies telling your grieving aunt that Uncle Mike never looked better (when, in fact, he never looked worse): and it was forlorn skating rinks and balls bouncing over lyrics on movie screens in theaters where no one sang along.

That was the organ I remembered, the organ that was tired, sad, and hopelessly out of sync with the times.

Ah, but how those times, those organs, and even those organists have changed. That once frumpy instrument has gone superelectronic and, along with the synthesizer, has become the darling of pop musicians and switched-on classicists. Why, even the median age of the contemporary organist is now a tender if still

untrustworthy thirty, when only ten short years ago he or she was a tottering forty-five.

Will wonders never cease?

Not yet, for the really big news in the transfiguration of the organ is that it's now the phantom front-runner of the music industry. As if by stealth, this electronic upstart has quietly become the trade's leading money-maker, outdistancing both the piano and the guitar. Last year, for example, sales totalled \$463 million compared to only \$304 million for the piano and \$222 million for the guitar.

Impressed?

Then pull out your organ stops and consider this trendy statistic served up (as are others in this article) by the American Music Conference. Since 1950, there has been a 2000 percent increase in the number of organ units sold to would-be Bachs as compared to a meager 43 percent hike for the grand and not-so-grand piano.

The regal piano still held a slight edge in units sold in 1976 (246,000 to 217,000), but the gap has been closing steadily ever since organ sales took off with a vengeance in the rockin' sixties.

Whether organs will ever replace pianos in America's living rooms is another story, though, for current estimates indicate three times as many Americans play (or rather, claim to play) the piano as play the organ—18 million versus 6 million. And that's a lead not easily overtaken.

Besides, numbers are only a part of the gap: snob appeal is another factor. The piano, after all, occupies a hallowed place in many an American household, whether it is being played by a precocious little Mozart or simply giving one's living room a touch of furnished class. Gladys Gooding's beloved organ never enjoyed such

continued on page 69

Picture, Inc.

◆ Lon Chaney, *The Phantom of the Opera*, finishes with a flourish in this 1925 Universal Pictures release.

The author is a Los Angeles freelance writer.

PHANTOM OF THE .MUSIC INDUSTRY

continued from page 47

cachet. thanks. of course. to smart aleck kids like me and to other musical snobs who routinely dismissed the early home organ as a blue-collar fad and a toy.

Obviously. today's organ has proven itself to be anything but a fad. It is a true child of the electronic age. embracing everything from transistors and computer chips to synthesizer components. It can make rank amateurs sound like accomplished students and professionals like entire orchestras. And it has moved composer David Rose. the musical director of TV's *Little House on the Prairie*. to hyperbole. "If the organ gets any better," intones Rose. "it might put all musicians out of work. There's so much you can do with it."

In a sense, the organ practically plays itself. Merely by pressing a button. a full flute chorus can be changed to the sound of a string. brass, or reed section-even to a complete range of individual instruments. including banjo. piano. oboe. and trumpet.

With a machine capable of such a racket. I hear you saying. who needs neighbors with noisy stereos. But hold on before you call the cops. Modern organs come equipped with headsets that allow the player to disturb no-one but himself when moved by the muse in the wee. wee hours of the morning.

The basic easy-to-play feature found on today's organ is one-finger chording. It enables a beginner to play a fully chorded song. complete with automatic rhythm accompaniment-in less than an hour. Try that with a piano-or better yet. with a violin-and see how many people ask you to "Play it again. Sam."

David Abell. a Los Angeles music dealer who caters to the serious musician. feels advances in organ technology have simply made the instrument more fun and interesting.

'It's the degree of sophistication and all the goodies that have become available." says Abell.

Full-size home organs come in two basic models. the spinet and the larger console. Spinets with one keyboard start at around \$600, and spinets with two keyboards and a thirteen-note pedalboard range in price from \$1,000 to \$4,000. Consoles. with larger keyboards and pedalboards. sell for \$8,000 and \$9,000.

For those with wondrous tastes and wondrous incomes. there's always a dream machine. such as Stevie Wonder's \$50,000 Electone GX-1 from Yamaha. It unites organ with synthesizer, a union dear to the

hearts of professional musicians. They contend such a marriage gives them virtually unlimited musical range and a competitive edge in an industry that demands versatility on all keyboards.

Where does it all end?

Not with a bang or a whimper. says Bill Worrall. publisher of *Keyboard World*. but with a shoe' box. "They're going to be able to make the organ cheaper and cheaper because of computer chips," says Worrall.

"Whereas it used to weigh five or six hundred pounds. in five or six years they'll be able to put all the electronics in a shoe box."

Maybe so. but what does that do for the organ's place in America's living rooms? Not much. I would think. After all, there's nothing very chic about gathering around a shoe box to carol in the New Year. Nothing very chic at all. Gladys-wherever you are. H

X

S/

